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ABSTRACT

Included in this booklet is an account of children's concepts of death at various ages. Specifically, the discussion examines the "average" or "normal" reaction of children from birth through 2 years; 3 through 5 years; 5 through 8 years; 9 through 10 years; and at 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, and 16 years. Children's reactions to the death of a pet and guidelines for parents for explaining death to their children are described. Suggestions for classroom discussions about death are offered; these may apply in the family context as well. It is suggested that such discussions in the home may take on added meaning and may enrich communication between parents and children. Suggestions for handling the death of a parent, the death of a child, and the death of a sibling are also included. Finally, two issues concerning whether or not children should attend funerals and the function of grief are examined. (AS)

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Children And Their Concepts of Death

Milton I. Faivre

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INTRODUCTION

There is much for us to learn about a child's discovery and his concept of death. It is likely that the reality of the early insights of a child will have to be acknowledged as the basis upon which this child adapts his behavior. A child's efforts to comprehend death are intimately related to his or her entire developmental pattern. Should the experience of death become overwhelming, then the child may be on the way to a long-lasting problem in thinking not only about death, but about the future as well.

Most children are likely to find the impact of death too much to comprehend when it first occurs, and it is only at a later date that the child shows outward signs of being troubled by the loss of a loved one. Many children behave as though death is reversible: a form of sleep, something that happens only to the aged, the wicked, or the unlucky.

How does the average child react to the death of a family member or close friend? In most western cul-

tures we face an attitude still prevalent that has not changed in many years: Children do not and should not think of death. As adults, we have the responsibility to protect our young ones from such a frightening and morbid topic — or so goes the usual reasoning.

This pamphlet will provide little support for the parent who wants to go on believing that the normal child has little if any relationship with death, or that it is to the child's benefit when we engage in evasive maneuvers. The burden of evidence is contrary to this way of thinking.

It would be a full-time and absolutely futile job to shelter a child from death in all its manifestations, even within a society such as ours that has become famous for its attempts in trying to keep mortality out of sight and out of mind. Death forces itself into the child's world in many ways. The significance of a death encounter in childhood cannot be judged entirely on the basis of outward reactions.

Children cannot be protected from learning about death, but what and how they learn are greatly influenced by the parents' feelings about the subject. The impact and meaning of death will vary with the child's age and the depth of the relationship. For example, the death of a beloved pet may be of much greater

significance to a young child than the death of a distant grandparent. Past deaths can evoke new thoughts and feelings in a child, as when the child wonders about the relative whose photograph has been around the house for a long time, but whom he or she has never met.

The death of people known and who are important to the child is an ever present possibility. Each death opens a vast range of possible responses and effects on the child. What happens depends to some extent upon who has died and what this person meant to the child. But it also depends upon other factors such as the circumstances that surrounded the death, how the news is told to the child, how other family members and friends behave, and how loving and understanding is the attention given to the child's feelings about the loss that has been suffered.

Fortunately, much has been learned in recent years about the ways in which children are likely to respond when confronted with a significant death. One of the most important lessons learned is that early experiences with death can be associated with the life-style and the problems that characterize the person many years later in adulthood. The significance of childhood bereavement upon adult development and behavior has been confirmed by many sources and has become an interest

of vital concern to those who deal with a child's cognitive development.

A CHILD'S CONCEPT OF DEATH

Probably the most important hurdle to overcome in dealing with a child's concept of death is the assumption that children seldom think of death. A number of studies in both the United States and England in recent years indicate that death is a common topic for young minds. Research has revealed that the games children play and the songs and riddles that they recite carry many variations on the theme and thoughts of death. Games known in ancient Rome, the Middle Ages, and the Victorian Age have been closely linked both with death and with the diversions of children. The ring-around-the-rosies game was invented and played by children who lived in the shadow of the plague hundreds of years ago. The long list of death-related games includes many variations of hide-and-seek, where all players attempt to outwit the person who has become "it".

Many professionals often notice death-related themes conveyed through the speech, play, and artistic expressions of young children. Dolls die and are brought back to life. A crayon drawing shows a mother and

father as angels singing in heaven.

A child does not have to be morbid or abnormal to think of death. Far more unusual would be the child whose curiosity has never been aroused by the mysteries of things disappearing (Where did the sun go? What happened to the ice or snow?), or the threat of separation (What if my father does not come home from work?)

It is worth noting that children from poor or deprived families cite violence, accidents, or suicides as the cause of death more often than do middle class children. The latter usually see death as due to disease and old age.

The age of a child determines just how he looks at death and what it means. The following divisions by age should give the reader a more detailed account about what to expect from a child at a specific age. However, it should be remembered that the information provided here is considered an "average" or "normal" reaction. Each child is a product of his or her environment and as such will react to these influences.

BIRTH THROUGH TWO YEARS

Infants under 6 to 9 months do not clearly see others as separate from themselves, and have no conception of such a trauma as death. Toddlers under two years of age do not really understand death, and relate only that the parent or sibling is absent. Although death is not a fully conscious fact to youngsters in this age group, the anxiety about the absent member is very real.

The toddler discovers in these years that he or she is not omnipotent, but completely dependent. During this time another person, usually the mother in our culture, literally keeps this youngster alive.

At the beginning of the third year, some noticible changes do begin to appear.

AGE THREE THROUGH FIVE YEARS

Children at this age respond more spontaneously and with less anxiety to questions about death than at the other ages, possibly because they do not comprehend its permanency or the personal effect it can have on them.

There is much curiosity about death, focusing upon what becomes of the body, why the person is buried,

etc. The dead are regarded as "less alive," not entirely devoid of sensation and functioning. Furthermore, the child has not firmly grasped the idea of finality. The fact of separation between the living and the dead, however, does come across clearly to the child at this young age, and can be a cause of real concern.

When the question about death does arise, the first explanation should be casual, not too scary or detailed. A parent might say, "Everybody has to die someday. Most people die when they get very old and tired and weak. They just stop being alive." When parents have very strong religious beliefs, the reply might be, "He was very, very sick and God took him to Heaven to take care of him." Remember that the important response to the child at this stage and at this age is affection, both physical and verbal. The parent must reassure the child that he or she will be around for a long time to take care of him.

It is important for adults to be absolutely honest with their children at this age, and not to attempt to sugar-coat death with terms like "going on a long trip" or "going to sleep." Both of these terms just make the child's other fears worse – that going to sleep or on a trip does cause permanent loss of the people they love. The trauma caused by these two statements can cause

serious physical damage to the child who is then afraid to go to sleep or to the child who becomes sick or uncontrollable whenever a trip of any duration is planned.

The manner in which death is explained to children in this age group will determine in many cases just how well adjusted they will become and how they will be able to handle the trauma of death as they grow older.

AGE FIVE THROUGH EIGHT YEARS

Children between the ages of five and eight generally show a genuine curiosity concerning death. At this age, they are in school and are going further away from home. This separation seems to kindle in their minds questions about being separated for long periods of time and that by leaving home they might not see their parents or siblings again.

This is the age when the fear of death usually begins, and the child starts to understand that death is final – a dead person will not return. This represents a big step in mental development – the idea that life does not go on forever. The child does realize that death means that the body stops functioning, but they see death caused by some mysterious, outside force.

The results of one survey conducted concerning

children's ideas of death showed some interesting theories. The children tended to think of death as a person. This dead person might be a bogey-man, or a strange, silent figure who makes his rounds in the night picking those children who have been bad to "get rid of." Another idea advanced by the child's death thinking at this level of development was the belief that one could "luck out" and avoid death. Although death was seen as final, the clever or lucky person might not get caught.

The idea at this age that death happens to other people perhaps helps the child to protect himself from the full implication that death is final. Although the child is now learning about death and that it's something that does happen, he does not at this age understand that it will happen to him sometime in the future.

AGE NINE THROUGH TEN YEARS

The nine and ten year old, much like that of the five year old, has thought processes that are related to the "here and now." He thinks in terms of reality, and is looking for facts. The idea of death or God really absorbs his interest at this age. He usually accepts the fact

that all people die and from what he sees, death is something that will come much later, but never at his age.

His idea is that you die when you get old. Therefore, the usual question when the subject comes up is, "Why think about it now when there are so many other things to think about?" In his own words he sums up his thoughts, "Well, it's something that's going to happen someday, why worry about it now?" The important fact to a nine or ten year old is that a person dies, and isn't heard from again.

Up to this age, this child used to be concerned about death and what might happen after a person dies, but now he accepts what he knows, although he does have an interest in what happens to the body. He knows that after death the body "rots or falls apart" but he usually doesn't dwell on this. Other changes that may occur in the body after death he occasionally speculates about. Some nine and ten year olds have been reported as thinking that when a person dies they "just sit up in the sky and watch what everyone else is doing." They also speculate that "they don't have to be fed. They don't talk." As for heaven, that's a place that is beyond his thinking, possibly because he "hasn't been there." But if he does believe that heaven does exist, most children of his age would

rather think that both good and bad people go there, because no one can be too bad.

THE ELEVEN YEAR OLD

The eleven year old takes death for granted in about the same way as did the nine and ten. If a person dies, they die and that's all there is to it.

At this age they are especially affected by the death of a grandparent, and they are even more disturbed by the death of a family animal, especially a dog. They are very interested in the burial of a person, and may wish to go to a funeral just out of curiosity. They may also ask questions that may seem callous or morbid, not for the shock value, but as a means of satisfying their curiosity.

The child of this age begins to change his concept of what happens to people after they die. They don't dwell on the problem, but do believe that dead people live someplace else much like they did on earth. It might be "like having a real long sleep" or maybe "their souls just keep going further and further away." The eleven year old has some ideas about what adults would conceive of as reincarnation, of going away, coming back to

stay for awhile, and then going away again. This view is very similar to the way his thinking processes operated at age five or six.

THE TWELVE YEAR OLD

Although a large number of twelve year olds do not show much concern for death, many are beginning to wonder what it means. The ideas of the past few years are starting to converge, and they are attempting to put it all together. Some children at this age dread the idea of death, and shudder at the thought of it, but many will admit that they are no longer afraid. Those who are still afraid of what death means express a desire that if they must die it will happen when they are asleep. Though twelve year olds do not like to think about dying, they still recognize and accept the fact that everyone will die sooner or later. They rationalize about death saying that if some people did not die, there would be too many people in the world.

There are those in this age group who want to work out their own answers about life after death. They aren't sure about their feelings. Twelve year olds will occasionally stop and wonder to themselves or to close friends, "will I die, and if I do, what really happens to

me?"

Those who spend little time wondering about death are usually those who accept what they are taught by parents or their church, that if you have lived a good life you go to Heaven, but if you've been "bad" you end up in hell. To many twelve year olds, going to Heaven or hell seems to be rather "silly." Many feel that there is a strong relationship between how you act when you are alive and what will happen to you when you die. They are more concerned with death ending this life, even terminating any memory of what happened in this life, and they think about starting a new life after death. It is not unusual for a child of twelve to sincerely feel that they will be reborn and return to earth as another person, a reaction reinforced from time to time by the plots of various television shows.

THE THIRTEEN YEAR OLD

Most thirteen year old adolescents admit that they think very little about death and dying. The thought of their own death seems very remote and not anything that will happen in the immediate future, therefore it doesn't draw their attention. Most children of this age

feel that death is nothing to be afraid of, it's an "accepted fact," something that will have to happen but at a later date.

Some thirteen year olds think of death as a stopping place, and an ending. Many boys see it scientifically, "The heart stops beating and the brain dies due to loss of blood."

Those who think of death as the end are not convinced concerning whether there is a heaven or hell. Most say they really don't know what happens. If there is a heaven or hell, they want the facts but realize that there can be no scientific proof. Death is the final act, after that most people are forgotten in a few years.

Some thirteen year olds are concerned about how it feels to die and does it hurt. They aren't sad about dying as they were at eleven and twelve, but they do express a sadness for the people left behind, those who were close friends, or the family of the dead person.

There is a real shift during this age in their belief about life after death, if the thirteen year old does have any thoughts on the subject. He thinks less about reincarnation and slowly begins to doubt that there are two places to go to. He usually doesn't believe in "everlasting punishment," though he does think that there might be a place where everyone must stay for awhile on their

way to another life or to heaven.

Most thirteen year olds are still in a state of flux, their thoughts are not resolved and their reactions depend on outside influences such as school, church, parents, and peers.

THE FOURTEEN YEAR OLD

At the age of fourteen, there is less concern about death and more interest about life and living. He wants to live as long as he can and wants to live a "whole life." He believes that no one should ever die early, and that a very long life is due everyone on the earth.

He seldom has thoughts about death, and he believes that it is something that is coming, but not right now. He feels that death is a good thing when a serious accident occurs, or when a person is very old and feeble. A fourteen year old appears to be able to face death with little fear.

His thoughts of what happens after death include the reality of being placed in a coffin and buried, but he does not completely understand just what might be beyond that. This age adolescent is not being skeptical, he really doesn't know and understand.

Many fourteen year olds think that the possibility

of what they have learned about heaven and hell, and that what may occur after death is influenced by what a person does or does not accomplish on earth. If he does "good things", he will be rewarded.

THE FIFTEEN YEAR OLD

The adolescent of fifteen has trouble accepting the fact that there are many forces in life that he cannot control. Some will react about death "if it happens, it will happen." They seem to accept the fact that death might just be a complete stopping point.

What occurs after death is a real mystery to many fifteen year olds. They frankly say that they have "no idea" and that it is "beyond them to know." The thought of an "endless sleep" satisfies some. At this age, many of those who have previously believed in heaven now find the concept of a hereafter a little difficult to accept, though most would still like to believe in some form of life after death. Their area of reality at this age finds it very difficult to accept the fact that everyone must go either to a heaven or a hell.

Some fifteen year olds do cling to some thought about a life after death, keeping in their minds memories of those who have died, but with whom they were

close while living.

THE SIXTEEN YEAR OLD

The adolescent of sixteen is influenced by the commonly accepted notions concerning heaven and hell and usually is found to believe in the afterlife more than the fifteen year old. He may simply think that the good go to heaven and the bad go to hell, or he may think that the heaven-bound individuals are those who are sorry for what they did wrong and the hell-bound ones are not sorry.

There are some at this age who don't know, who haven't given the fact of death much thought, or who really aren't particularly interested in it. Others feel that nothing happens at death, nothing more than a type of sleep.

The sixteen year old is more likely to have experienced the death of a friend or relation than when he was younger. He usually becomes very quiet when older relatives die, but may become stunned or deeply affected when a friend or peer dies. He is also very deeply affected by the death of a movie star, rock star, or hero. He wishes that people he knows or respects wouldn't die.

THE DEATH OF A PET

The death of a pet can be both a time of sadness and a learning experience in the child's development, and can serve the child and parent as a preparatory step in coping with the possible loss of a family member or close friend at a later time.

We would prefer that our children's experience with death would come in small, gradual doses. We would like, whenever possible, to avoid a child witnessing the painful or bloody death of a pet. With very young children, we try to postpone knowledge of death by violence. In all cases, parents should attempt to gauge their child's strength and understanding before attempting to discuss death.

Most children see a great deal of killing on television, but few actually see or have had an experience first hand with death. Since children seldom observe dead or dying persons, they must learn to gain respect for life, and experience the sadness of death in other beings. A pet provides this learning experience.

The involvement of the daily caring for a pet, in responding to its need for food and a place to live, teaches the child responsibility and compassion. This attachment will have a lasting effect on the child's

growth and values in later life.

Most children do acquire a pet of some type, many at an early age, and quickly develop an attachment for it. Although their interest in caring for it will vary with the influence of family and friends, it does serve as the first step in sharing their love. But, if that pet should die, this parental attitude almost immediately changes from one of appreciating and enjoying the child's relationship to the pet to one of doing their best to hide the death from the child. Parents not only deny the knowledge and experience of death to a child, but they refuse to discuss anything about death in general.

Some psychologists insist that dead pets bring to an adult's mind the fact that they are mortal and must sometime in the future experience death. This feeling is transmitted to the child through an attempt to cover-up a pet's death. Also, many parents feel that the death of a pet will cause an unnecessary emotional event to an otherwise happy and well-adjusted child.

In many cases, the death of a pet is covered up by the parent attempting to convince the child that the pet has run away and found a new home. However, most children are able to see through this explanation. The result can be more anguish and turmoil in both the child and the parent by the time spent in attempting to

"locate" the missing pet.

The thought that the parent has in trying to cover-up the death of a pet is that the child is not old enough to know that the parent is not telling the truth. There are times when the parent can be clever and convincing enough to apparently succeed. Also, in many cases the truth of such a matter can be withheld from the child at the parents convenience. However, all parents must realize that no matter how the cover-up is handled, or what has been told to the child when the death occurs, the shock that the child will experience if the truth is found out will be more devastating than if the truth had been told when the death occurred. It must be remembered that most children can recognize a lie and are able to determine when a parent is holding back the truth.

When it comes to something as important as the death of a pet, the evasion of the truth is unlikely to register as truth to the child, and will many times hinder an otherwise trusting relationship. On the other hand, telling the truth, in spite of the fact that it will be very painful in most cases to both the child and the parent, can open up the way to develop a more trusting, significant relationship between them. The parent and child who have gone through the trauma of the death

of a pet together may gain strength and wisdom to endure a more significant trauma, such as the death of a family member or friend, at a later time.

Experiences with living things will lead a child to a recognition of the life cycle, and by being responsive to living things in all situations (home, school, play), he acquires an understanding of what death really means. With a parent's recognition of the child's interest and curiosity about death, the opportunity is there to develop a deep tie. This tie will, at some time in the future, help them to handle the emotions of human death.

When a pet dies, the child should be allowed to grieve, to discuss his loss and his feelings about it, perhaps to even prepare a burial. A child's grief over the loss of a pet is natural and healthy. A parent should grieve with the child and show him sympathy. A talk with the child about his friendship with the pet can be very helpful. A parent who immediately says, "Oh, it's only an old dog that died. Stop your sniffling!" negates honest emotion that the child is expressing. At a later date the child might be given another pet, but this should never be hurried. There will be a right time and a right moment. Meanwhile, the parent should explain that the pet is not sad, "He doesn't miss us, and he isn't

in pain. He doesn't feel anything at all because that is what being dead means."

When a child has been able to watch a pet grow and then die, his mind begins to understand what death is about. It is part of a life experience that will better equip him to cope with the more serious encounters of the future.

EXPLAINING DEATH TO CHILDREN

When the time comes to explain death to children, there is no simple, foolproof formula that can be used in all situations. Parents differ, and so do children. To be of any real help to their children, adults must be able to face death realistically themselves. If they cannot, their underlying fear and confusion will be felt by the child, whatever words that the parents may use. A parent who tries to hide grief for the sake of the youngster will rarely be able to do so convincingly. Communication between parent and child that is clear, open, and most important, honest, is essential if the parent is to help the child cope with his grief. Aware of the gap between what a parent says and what he or she feels, the child will be even more disturbed than if he had been given a straightforward account of what has happened.

If death is a riddle to adults, to children it is a frightening occurrence veiled in mystery. The young child cannot comprehend that death is permanent, that neither his parents nor his prayers can bring back the departed. The futility of his wishes and hopes in the face of death is a severe blow to the child. It shocks his belief in his power to influence events by wishful thinking, and it makes him feel anxious and left out. What the child once saw and related to is no longer with him. Consequently, he feels abandoned and unloved. His fear is reflected in the question often asked of a parent, "After you die, will you still love me?"

A child should be told about death in ways that will make him understand that a deceased person does not breathe, sleep, or need food. A child needs to understand the essential fact that sleeping and being dead are not the same thing, that they have nothing to do with each other. Once the child can comprehend the fact that this finality of death happens to everyone, he will be better equipped to deal with the loss he has suffered.

A child needs to know that life is precious, but that death can come to anyone at any time. The parent must explain to the child that the person who has died can be kept alive in one's mind by pleasant memories. A child that is loved by his family will be better able to

develop a healthy adjustment to the death.

There is no easy way to explain the loss of a family member or close friend to a child, but there are certain guidelines that may be followed that can ease the process for both the parent and the child.

1. Explain the immediate cause of death – whether accident, illness, or old age – rather than giving a philosophical or religious interpretation. Rarely can the latter be understood by children, or be helpful to them. In talking about a death caused by accident, you can emphasize how we all have to be careful and protect ourselves from mishap as far as we can. In discussing sickness as the cause of death, you can stress that doctors don't yet have all the answers to prevent illness. If old age was the main factor in death, you can explain that everyone's body eventually grows old and tired, and that a time comes when the heart can no longer do its work.
2. Make it clear that the death of someone from illness or accident does not mean that the child too is likely to die from that illness, or will he meet with the same type of accident.

3. Because children tend to take undue blame or credit on themselves, reassure the child that he or she is not to blame for the death. Many children do feel guilty in this way, whether they express the feeling openly or not, and it is wise to try to forestall it as soon as possible.
4. As far as the physical body is concerned, state plainly that life has stopped, that the dead person has been buried in a specific place and cannot return. They feel no pain. Anything short of this is apt to cause confusion and prolonged anxiety. Of course, the age and mental capacity of the child must be taken into consideration, and the level of explanation must fit the cognitive development of the child.
5. Give specific reassurances when the encounter with death poses a special threat to the child. If a playmate has died, children naturally fear that they may suffer the same fate. Tell them how unlikely that is. When parents of children in their circle of friends are known to have died, they will worry that this may happen to their own fathers or mothers. The core of this anxiety might be expressed in these words, "What will happen to me if my father (or

mother) dies?" After reassuring the child that very few people die when they are as young as his parents, you might explain how, if this should happen, he would still be loved and cared for. If he knows that grandparents, aunts and uncles, or close family friends will be around to look after him, his anxiety is likely to be much less.

6. Don't exclude children from family mourning altogether. Nothing can exaggerate the enormity of death in a child's mind more than the sign of all the grown-ups looking solemn or distraught and not paying the slightest attention to him or her. Children need assurance that they are not forgotten, that those they love may be temporarily upset but still really do care about them.

   One common practice is to send the children away to stay with friends until after the funeral. While this is a move to spare youngsters the often upsetting effects of funeral ceremonies, it is not always the wisest move. The children suffer the shock of being separated from the family at a time when they sense mysterious goings-on of great importance.

It is usually better to err on the side of allowing children to be part of all the family experiences, including whatever the family does in the way of honoring the dead, than to exclude them from the painful ones. They deserve the right to belong, to feel sorrow as well as joy. Being close to the family during this special time can be an important source of strength.

Naturally there are limits to what a child should be exposed to. If it seems likely that there will be hysterical behavior at the funeral, it may be better to spare a child the possible ill effects of such extreme expressions of grief. But this does not mean that the child need be denied all participation.

7. Try not to show resentment at the way a child reacts to a death in the family, even if the child's response disturbs you. If you are a surviving parent, you may face an angry son or daughter, angry at the parent who has died, angry at you for having let him or her die. But don't be shocked if the first reaction is casual, even seemingly callous, since this may cover a multitude of feelings. Be alert for an opening

that will allow the child to talk about what he or she is experiencing. Older children are more likely to be able to talk about their feelings. But don't push them into it. They may need to work things out a bit on the inside before trying to put them into words. Be ready to respond whenever a child shows a desire to talk.

Sometimes children handle their feelings through playing death and funeral scenes. For a bereaved adult this may seem to mock a deeply poignant experience and may be hard to take. In light of what is known about children's play, however, you may be relieved that they express their feelings in this way rather than locking them up inside themselves.

RELIGION AND DEATH

Religion is a prime source of strength and support to many people when they are dealing with death. But if religion has not played an important role in a family's life before death, a child may be confused or frightened by the sudden introduction of religious explanations or references. Children tend to hear words literally, and

religious explanations that may comfort an adult may unsettle a child. For example, the explanation, "Baby brother is with God now," or "It is God's will," could be frightening rather than reassuring to the young child who may worry that God might decide to come and get her just as he did her baby brother.

Also, mixed messages are confusing, deepening apprehensions and misunderstandings children may have about death. A statement such as"Bobby is happy now that he is in Heaven with the angels," when combined with obvious and intense grief, can leave them not knowing which to trust – what they see or what they hear. They may wonder why everyone is so unhappy if Bobby is happy. They need to hear something about the sadness we feel about losing Bobby as we knew and experienced him, in addition to our expressions of religious faith.

Regardless of how strong or comforting religious beliefs may be, death means the loss of a living being, the absence of a physical presence. It is a time of sadness and mourning. It is important to help children accept the realities of death – the loss and the grief. Attempts to protect children deny them opportunities to share their feelings and receive needed support. Sharing feelings helps. Sharing religious beliefs also helps

if done with sensitivity to how children are perceiving and understanding what is happening and what is being said. It is important to check with them to find out how they are hearing and seeing events around them.

DEATH AND THE CLASSROOM TEACHER

Discussion about death in the classroom is most effective and useful to the child if the teacher is able to listen appropriately. Together with a warm and supportive atmosphere, it is important that the teacher must not show signs of anxiety or insecurity. Children tend to become anxious when they sense anxiety in adults – whether they are in the classroom or at home. If a parent or teacher is very nervous about handling the topic, this tension will be communicated to the child.

From a child's point a view, a discussion of death and dying in the classroom should be general and open minded. This allows the child who does not want to confront such issues to be present and listen, but it does not force him to participate in a discussion that would provoke undue anxiety. The child who would become upset by such a discussion in the classroom is very rare, but his rights and feelings must be respected. By the same token, the child who holds defensive positions

with regard to his or her thinking about death may do this as an emotional necessity. In such cases, the teacher should not attempt to force a "re-education" of the child concerning death.

The topics which might provide a general source of classroom discussion about death could include: differences between living and non-living things, cultural differences in ideas about death as seen in history or social studies, or the death of a classroom pet. The occasion may also arise unexpectedly when a pupil's relative or friend dies, and this is mentioned aloud in the class. In general, the teacher will find many cues in the form of questions when the class is interested in such a discussion. Caution must be exercised, however, not to focus attention on children who have suffered a significant emotional loss.

If Susie Jones, for example, comes to class and announces with some degree of tension that her little sister was hit by a truck and killed the week before, this could be an opportunity for a classroom learning experience – and a chance to give Susie some extra support as well. It would be appropriate to mention how people feel sad and miss others very much when they die. It would also be in order to comment that even when people are dead, we can remember them and keep a part

of them alive inside our heads. On the other hand, it would be unwise to focus on Susie and ask, "How do you feel about what has happened?". A child who brings up such a topic is often asking for support in the face of his or her own loss. Listening to the comments and ideas of others can often provide such support, while forcing a child to focus on his or her own feelings in a group context is more isolating and a greater emotional strain. Once again, one must listen to the emotional need being expressed and not simply address the direct question.

The best approach in the classroom context is usually one that is guided by the interests and questions of children involved. In a science class, questions about life cycles and causes of death will come up quite naturally. In social studies, the concept of death and the pyramids of Egypt or the burial caves of the American Indians are also natural areas of children's interests. From these interests, the understanding teacher can lead a discussion that will benefit the children and provide a foundation for future discussions when some trauma does occur.

These suggestions apply as well in the family context as they do in the classroom. Such discussions in the home take on added meaning and may enrich

the communication bonds between the parent and the child.

DEATH OF A PARENT

There are now nearly a half-million children experiencing the crisis of a parental death each year in the United States, with one out of every twenty children losing a father or mother before the youngster is finished with elementary school. This is a severe problem, and one that must be handled with education, understanding, and emotional stability.

The death of a parent is a much more traumatic event for the child than the death of another family member or close friend. The home is disrupted emotionally, financially, and socially. If the father dies, the mother may have to go to work outside the home. If she has very young children, this usually creates still another crisis to be solved. In many cases, the surviving parent may feel harassed, cheated, resentful, and not capable of giving the child adequate attention and comfort. The older a child is when a parent dies, of course, the less likely that the loss will adversely affect the child's personality development.

The same precepts that are important for helping a

child accept the death of any person hold true when a parent dies. These precepts are especially hard for the surviving parent to follow if he or she is grieving profoundly. But other family members, friends, school, and community contacts can greatly help. They too, should help a child accept the reality of what has happened and express his feelings naturally.

Children often do feel guilty when a parent dies. It is not uncommon for a mother to say, "You'll be the death of me yet!" when a child is trying her patience. If the mother would then die prematurely, the child may feel overwhelmed by guilt. The younger child may feel not only guilt when the parent dies but a devasting sense of abandonment or deliberate desertion. Anger at the deserter is a natural response, but it is not usually acceptable in our culture. Helping a child realize that he or she has not been abandoned deliberately is very important.

When it is the mother who dies, particularly with young children, others must try to keep basic home routines as unchanged as possible. Whenever possible there should be one person in the home who can stay with the child long enough to give him or her a sense of continuity in love and care. When this is not possible, good day care with people who understand and are willing

to take the time to help the child is very important and necessary.

No single parent is able to fill the place of the missing one. All he or she can hope to do is to fill the appropriate role and be willing to accept the help of those around the family. A motherless child may find a close relationship with a grandmother or aunt. A fatherless child may have a grandfather or uncle who can lend support. If these close relationships are not immediately available, a teacher or church worker would be an acceptable substitute. In urban areas, there are a number of social agencies that provide the companionship necessary for the one-parent home. If the surviving parent feels that there is a need for professional counseling, there should be no feeling of guilt when that parent asks for help.

THE DYING CHILD

When a child is dying, the natural order of life is tragically reversed. It is hardly possible for parents to view the death of their child as anything but a catastrophe. The resulting grief, guilt, and fury can be very traumatic. The parents find themselves walking an impossible tightrope. On one hand it is crucial to a dying

child's morale that the parents spend a good deal of time with him or her. On the other hand, family life, especially if there are other children, must go on as nearly normal as possible. In the absence of their mother, even non-fatally ill children react with severe signs of regression during their hospital stay. In cases of prolonged absence, the child will progress through three phases: protest, despair and then detachment. Once detachment takes place, the child may start to ignore the parents and a vicious cycle of mutual withdrawal occurs. This adds to an already existing trauma.

During a prolonged absence, the child usually senses that the parents are distressed and the relationship becomes not only difficult but different. Attention may even increase, but the child often sees the subtle intensification of feelings that signal something is wrong. Parents may fluctuate between frantic closeness and emotional distance, since they know that their child is dying and they attempt to prepare themselves for the end. Mothers especially may dedicate themselves completely to the care of the child, or they may become overwhelmed with the tragedy of the child's suffering and find it almost impossible to spend much time with their child for fear of breaking down totally. Walking the thin line between total dedication and total dislo-

cation is not easy, but it is something that parents must face during the dying experience.

When young children are sick, they often feel anger at their parents for failing to protect them and a terrible fear of abandonment. Most often the younger child will feel that they themselves have brought on the sickness, that they are responsible for what has happened to them.

At what age do most children begin to realize that they are very sick or dying? There have been reports of four-year olds who have confided that they knew they were dying. But this is very rare. At age five or six, however, many sick children ask outright if they are dying, but do not really understand what dying and death is actually about. They may not want to really know the truth, but are expressing the realization that they are very ill. Most children are content with an explanation about why they are ill, some understandable description of what is happening inside their body, and some solid reassurance that people care what is happening and they will be taken care of. It is significant that children ask doctors or the hospital staff about death more than they ask their parents. Studies have shown that many children are afraid of upsetting their parents with such open talk. So they ask others who seem to really care.

Angry, rebellious children sometimes respond better to their situation than those who are passive and very co-operative. Children who are overly compliant often feel overwhelming fear and guilt that they are the ones that caused their illness.

DEATH OF A SIBLING

All children have a certain amount of rivalry with their brothers and sisters. Stemming from the desire of each child to be the first and the most important with their parents, this rivalry results in the bickering familiar in most families. Within the wide bounds of normalcy, parents accept this for what it is – a type of practice exercise in getting along with members of one's own generation and in sharing the parents' attention.

However, a relationship with a sister or brother, though the majority of times very close in childhood, is not always a loving experience. Sometimes very strong feelings are generated, and the child will think or be heard to say, "He bugs me so much, I wish he was dead." If this brother or sister does then die from any cause, the surviving child may feel extreme guilt, thinking that his or her own strong wishes had something to do with the death.

Children should be encouraged to talk about their feelings – of sadness, of anger over losing a brother or sister, of loss of attention, and their fears of dying themselves.

The parent should anticipate reactions such as regressive behavior and a general mistrustfullness to occur with a sibling death. The child is waiting for the other shoe to fall. If the child withdraws, if the parent is too upset to talk and listen at length to the child, if there is a history of mental illness in the family, or if there has been an accidental death of the sibling, it would be good for the parent to consult a professional who could assist in putting the grief experience in perspective.

With the death of the sibling, and when a child can have the comfort and love of those with whom the grief is shared, the child is supported and aided in coping with death by the presence and attention of parents.

Though it may be difficult, a parent should enter into the child's school life, friendships, and hobbies, striving to carry on family life in as many familiar ways as possible. Such an effort can serve as an anchor in the midst of an emotional storm. It should be remembered that most children are resilient, and can with time and understanding work through their grief.

Loss of a brother or sister creates a turmoil within

the child that does not heal easily. During this period of time the gentle warmth of parents and other close relatives can provide the means for the hurt to be healing and for the child to return to normal without permanent emotional damage.

SHOULD CHILDREN ATTEND THE FUNERAL?

Rites for the dead throughout the centuries have had an enormous importance for human beings and children are not an exception. Sharing moments of great meaning with parents and close friends brings the child a sense of fulfillment and dignity. Most of us, even if we do not hold to a religious belief, seem to need some ritual, no matter how simple, to mark the moment of farewell.

The young child, under school age, may be frightened and confused at what he sees during a funeral. Uncontrolled weeping, hysterics, and other sights-sounds, may be more than he or she can bear. The danger is far less for older youngsters who are usually more grounded in their ability to handle the emotions of others. But even for them it is a trying experience. The older youngster is able to understand a great deal more, especially if someone takes the time to explain what is happening.

They are able to sort things out in their minds, realizing that some of the heavy emotional displays are not as meaningful as they appear to be.

A child needs some preparation for the funeral and should be told exactly what will happen. If a child knows in advance just what he will see and hear, he will be much less anxious. If the casket is to be opened, he should be told how the face of the dead person will appear. Let him make the decision whether he will want to look at the body in the casket or not. The same is true about the child attending the ritual at the cemetery. The experience will usually be much harder on the child, yet it is better for him to be included with the ceremonies at the grave site since he will see for himself that the person is dead and will not be coming back. To allow the child to actually see the casket being lowered into the grave is a decision that must be well thought out and should only be encouraged for very special reasons. Again, the viewing of the body, attendance at the grave site, and observing the body being lowered into the grave are all decisions that the child should be allowed to make with the help and understanding of the loving parents.

A child, of any age, who does not attend the funeral of a member of the family, needs someone to stay close-

ly by during the hours the parent is away. It is important that this person not be a stranger, but someone who the child knows and who can help the child with his grief during even this short period of time. If the person is one who the child has learned to love over a period of time, the trauma will be less on all concerned.

When someone dies, the children may be helped by the feeling that there are things they can do, and ways in which they are needed. Even the youngest child can help during the first few days. The bustle which preceeds a funeral has value for everyone. It calls for action and this in itself brings welcome relief for those involved.

In talking over the funeral plans with a child, a parent may find that the child has mistaken ideas about what will take place, but he hasn't wanted to express them. This is an excellent opportunity for these feelings to be expressed and to let the child question what is going on.

If the child objects to attending the funeral and the parent believes that he is mature enough to go, perhaps all that is necessary is time for the child to think it over. He may change his mind, especially if the parents are careful not to put him under heavy pressure. However, the parent must be willing to accept the child's deci-

sion not to go and find a way for the child to be made to feel alright about his decision.

The child should never be made to feel that he has acted badly by the decision that he has made. Whatever the outcome of his decision, he needs to know that he is a loved and valued member of the family group. Possibly at a later time the child may be able to express his reasons for feeling so strongly and what emotions and fears lay at the root of his inability to attend the funeral.

The impact of this experience upon a child will vary from child to child, depending on the age of the child, the relationship of the child with the deceased, the emotional needs of the child, and the child's personality. Children may benefit from the funeral, but they may be psychologically harmed. For example, seeing a body lying in state may reinforce the notion that death is the same as sleep, and cause (serious) problems each time the discussion of sleep is brought up.

SHOULD CHILDREN GRIEVE?

A child should not be deprived of his right to grieve and mourn. He should be free to feel sorrow in the loss of someone that has been loved. The child's humanity

is deepened, and his character is enriched, when he can grieve over the end of a life.

The basic fact that should be thought out and accepted is that children should not be excluded from showing the sorrows as well as the joys that inevitably arise in the course of family life. When a death occurs and the child is not told what has happened, he may remain shrouded in an unnecessary anxiety, or he may feel that something is really missing in his knowledge. With fearful and confused explanations of his own, he may blame himself for the loss of the dead person and begin to feel separated not only from the dead but from the living.

The first step in helping children face their loss is to allow them to express fully their fears, fantasies, and their feelings. Comfort and consolation can come from sharing these deep emotions with someone in the family who cares. The parent may also put into words some of the feelings that a child is bound to have, but may find difficult to express. For example, after the death of a grandfather to whom the child was attached, the parent might say:

> You miss grandpa. You wish he was still alive.
> You miss him alot. It's hard to believe he is gone.

You loved him so much, and he loved you.
You remember him so well.

Such statements convey to the child that his parents have an interest in his feelings, and encourage him to share his fears and fantasies with them. The child may want to know whether dying hurts, whether the dead ever come back to life, and whether his parents will ever die.

When a child is given the facts simply and honestly, accompanied by an affectionate hug and a loving look, he feels reassured. This approach is effective when parents themselves have accepted the realistic approach to life and death.

Assist the child to unburden his feelings through expression, confession, remembrance, and release. The child needs to talk, not just to be talked to. He should be given every opportunity to discuss his memories of the person who has died, to ask questions and to be permitted to feel that he may even express antipathy as well as affection for the deceased if he wishes to do so.

For the child whose grief is deep and sustained, provide every possible opportunity for him to talk about his loss. Then aid him in getting out of himself and into social activities appropriate to his age. The necessity for

carrying on a day-to-day routine will assist the process of adjustment, and in time, special interests and pleasures will again assume their normal place in the scheme of things – for both the parent and the child.

Children are people. They react to traumatic situations with such an emotional overtone as disbelief, bodily distress, anger, guilt, and anxiety. Children often act out their feelings in ways that do not seem appropriate to an adult. But the child may not be able to say what he feels with words so he must depend on body language and behavior to vent his feelings. Adults should be perceptive to an understanding of what this behavior means. Even so-called delinquent conduct may well be an acting out of grief, an expression of a feeling of injustice, the child's insecurity and confusion that often accompanies the fearful events in life.

Don't be afraid of causing tears. They are like a safety valve. So often parents and friends deliberately attempt to veer the conversation away from the deceased. They are apprehensive of the fears that might start to come. They do not understand that expressing grief through tears is not only natural and normal, but it is also therapeutic. Tears are the tender tribute of yearning affection for those who have died but can never be forgotten. The worst thing possible is for the

child not to express them. The child who is forced to keep his grief inside him will later find a release in a more serious explosion of his inner make-up. Proper mental health for all, both the child and the parent, depends on the acknowledgement of tragedy - not its denial.

SUMMARY

Communication about death, as with all communication, is easier when a child feels that he or she has permission to talk about the subject; he should feel the listener is sincerely interested in his views and questions. A child should be encouraged to communicate by listening attentively, respecting the views of the child, and answering questions honestly.

Every child is an individual. Communication about death depends on the age of the child and his experiences. If the child is young, he may view death as temporary, and he may be more concerned about separation from loved ones than about death itself.

It is not always easy to "hear" what a child is really asking. Sometimes it may be necessary to respond to a question with a question in order to fully understand the child's concern.

A very young child can absorb only limited amounts of information. Answers need to be brief, simple, and repeated when necessary.

A child often feels guilty and angry when he or she loses a close family member or friend. The child needs

support and understanding through this grief process and permission to show feelings openly and freely.

Whether a child should visit the dying or attend a funeral depends on age and the ability to understand the situation, the child's relationship with the dying or dead person, and most important, whether the child wants it. A child should never be coerced or made to feel guilty if he prefers not to be involved. If the child is permitted to visit the dying person or to attend the funeral, preparation should be made in advance for what the child will see or hear.

FOR FURTHER READING

Death: A part of life, "Current Health", Volume 3, No. 7, March 1977

Jackson, Edgar N., "Telling a Child About Death", New York: Hawthorn, 1965

Wolf, Anna, W.M., "Helping Your Child to Understand Death", New York: Child Study Press, 1973

SOURCES OF HELP FOR PARENTS

For parents of children who have died:

Compassionate Friends
P. O. Box 1347
Oak Brook, Illinois 60521

For parents who have lost infants to sudden infant death dyndrome:

National SIDS Foundation
310 Michigan Avenue South
Chicago, Illinois 60604